

Clumping Clay Kitty Litters: A Deadly Convenience?

by Marina Michaels

This article was first published in 1995 in Tiger Tribe magazine. Since then it has been reprinted in dozens of cat newsletters and has been handed out at cat shows and events around the world. The comment I receive most often? "You saved my cat's life."

Cats die. Kittens die. It's part of life. But we still grieve when they die, even though we know it is only the body, not the spirit, that is gone. How much worse we feel when those deaths were unnecessary, could have been prevented by something as simple as changing the kind of litter we use.

I breed Japanese Bobtail cats and I grieved in 1994 when an entire litter of kittens (born in November 1993) died. Despite round-the-clock nursing and force-feeding of fluids and food, one kitten, then another, let go of his grasp on life.

The three kittens started out as a robust, lively group. Then, at weaning time, just as they were learning to use the litter box, they began to vomit a yellow frothy substance and to pass yellow diarrhea; the diarrhea looked and smelled like clay. They also had nasal and eye discharge. The diarrhea proceeded to turn harder and even more clay-like, and finally the kittens stopped moving their bowels at all. The veterinarians said they could feel "a hard mass" inside. The kittens dwindled into thin, dehydrated, frail little skeletons, sunk in apathy. Then they died.

When these kittens first fell sick, I wasn't too worried, because I had seen the same set of symptoms in two earlier litters. The first time it happened I'd lost one kitten, but the other survived with a week of force-feeding fluids. When a second litter

started to exhibit the same symptoms, we took the kittens and their parents to the veterinarian, who tested them for everything from intestinal parasites to feline AIDS. The results were negative. "Some kind of virus" was the vague diagnosis, or "possibly giardia" (an intestinal parasite), even though the test for it was negative.

We nursed them, gave them fluids and love, and like the previous kittens, these two were over the problem in a week.

So the third time, with the November kittens, although I was a little worried, I was confident we could pull these through as well. But their illness dragged on for three weeks, and they grew progressively weaker. Again we had the cats and kittens tested for a variety of problems; again, nothing. And then, all within the same week, the kittens died.

When a fourth litter, born in late March 1994, began to exhibit the same symptoms yet again, I felt frustrated, frightened, and helpless. What was going on? Was there something in the environment? Was my home somehow a "sick house?" Was one of the adult cats carrying something that the kittens were picking up? I always keep my cats indoors, so it couldn't be exposure to outside cats.

A New Perspective

I decided I needed a new perspective and began to look for a holistic veterinarian. The next day, a

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friend gave me the card of a new holistic veterinarian in town, Dr. Stephanie Chalmers.

But before I had the chance to take the kittens to see this new vet, I was struck by a bolt of lightning. The clumping litter! It was almost as though someone had whispered it into my ear. It made perfect sense. Everything fit; it explained all the symptoms. My thinking went along these lines:

1. Clumping litter is designed to form a hard, insoluble mass when it gets wet. It also produces a fine dust when stirred (as when a cat scratches around to bury a recent deposit). And these clumping litters absorb many times their weight in fluids.
2. When cats or kittens use the litter box, they lick themselves clean; anything their tongues encounter gets ingested. Kittens especially tend to ingest a lot of litter when they are first learning to use the box.
3. Once the litter is inside a kitten or cat, it expands, forming a mass and coating the interior—thus, both causing dehydration by drawing fluids out of the cat or kitten, and compounding the problem by preventing any absorption of nutrients or fluids.

My cats and kittens had probably reacted with diarrhea initially in an effort to cleanse their bodies of the litter before it had a chance to settle and coat their insides. But kittens have very small intestines; a hard insoluble mass could very well produce a complete and fatal blockage within a couple of weeks.

On the strength of these deductions, I immediately went out and bought a plant-based litter to replace the clumping litter. I also took several of the hard, clay-like lumps of stool produced by two of the kittens and smeared them open. Not only did the stools have the consistency, smell, and texture of clay, but they even retained the color of the litter (gray with blue flecks) inside. This was confirmation enough for me.

As soon as I could, I took all the kittens, along with their mother, to Dr. Chalmers, who said that she

had already heard of problems like this with the clumping clay litters. She put the kittens on a holistic course of treatment (slippery elm to help soothe the intestines; homemade chicken broth to nourish the kittens without putting further strain on their insides).

She also showed me an article by Lisa Newman, another holistic health practitioner, citing some of the cases of illness and death that she (Lisa Newman) has seen first hand—illnesses and deaths most likely caused by clumping litter. A light went on in my head when I read the following:

“There has been a rise in depressed immune systems, respiratory distress, irritable bowel syndrome, and vomiting (other than hair balls) among cats that I have seen in the past two years. All had one thing in common...a clumping product in their litter box. In several cases, simply removing the litter improved the condition of the cat.” (“Great Clumping Cat Litter—Is That Why Kitty is So Sick?” *Healthy Pets—Naturally*, April 1994.)

The problem of health difficulties and even deaths resulting from clumping litters appears to be more prevalent than most people are aware of. I recently spoke with another Japanese Bobtail breeder, who told me of a kitten she sold that subsequently became very ill with a severe respiratory problem. The new owner used a clumping litter, and her veterinarian found that the kitten’s lungs were coated with dust from the litter.

For a veterinarian to spot this problem is unusual. A more common diagnosis would lay the blame at the door of a virus, germ, fungus or parasite. There is not a general awareness yet that the clumping litters can be harmful—even fatal—to cats.

Beyond Cats

And the problem extends beyond cats. As Lisa Newman points out in her article, dogs get into the litter box for “snacks,” and ingest the litter too. She reports that the autopsy of one dog revealed that his stomach was filled with the clumping litter.

An article entitled “How Cat Litter is Made” appeared in *Cat Fancy* magazine (October 1994). Shockingly, the article contains no cautions against the use of clumping litters, even though the description of one of the main ingredients in such products should be enough to alarm any thinking person.

“Sodium bentonite, a naturally swelling clay, is often added as an extremely effective clumping agent. When liquid is added, bentonite swells to approximately 15 times its original volume. But because sodium bentonite acts as an expandable cement would, litters containing sodium bentonite should never be flushed; when they expand they can block plumbing.”

A few moments’ thought is all that is needed to realize that something able to block household plumbing must be wreaking havoc on the plumbing of our feline companions.

What about my kittens after I switched to a plant-based litter? Sadly, the two females died. Both were passing clay stools right up until the time of their deaths; one kitten was still passing clay almost two weeks after I switched litters. The two males survived, though it took months for them to fully recover. Only after switching to a completely organic, homemade diet was I able to clear up the last traces of their ordeal. And still I grieve for the kittens who died so needlessly.

What You Can Do

You may feel as horrified as I do at the thought that there must be thousands of kittens and cats (and other animals) ailing or even dying from clumping clay litters. What can we do to prevent such suffering?

One thing is let the manufacturers know we won’t buy such products. My husband called a company that makes one of these clumping litters. The woman he spoke with said that the company is aware that clumping litters may be causing health problems, but that it is the consumer’s responsibility to make sure their cats don’t eat the stuff.

My husband pointed out that cats clean themselves with their mouths, so of course they’re going to eat the litter every time they use their cat boxes. Unfortunately, the company’s representative maintained her “buyer beware” position.

Given the attitudes of such companies, we can vote with our pocketbooks by purchasing products from businesses that are more responsive to our concerns. Be sure to let the makers of the clumping litter know why you no longer purchase their product. You might even choose to boycott all products made by these companies (it isn’t hard to find out who makes what—just read the labels). An even more effective move might be to show this article to the owners or managers of stores selling these products.

If you suspect that an animal may be suffering an ailment caused by clumping litter, take him or her to a veterinarian or holistic practitioner immediately, and explain what you think may be happening. If you encounter resistance, it may mean that the veterinarian is unfamiliar with the problem and doesn’t know how to handle it. Try to find a holistic vet—either locally or someone you can work with by phone—who has some experience with clumping litter impacting the intestines. Most importantly, replace the clumping litter right away with one of the plant-based alternatives. Even if your cat is healthy, it makes sense to switch to a different litter.

If you love cats as I do, spread the word. Tell everyone you know about this problem. Tell your veterinarian. You may save the lives of many kittens, cats, and other beloved creatures.

For More Information

For a list of related articles, see CatMom.com, which has this article. In addition, you will find a number of related articles on natural alternatives as well as some tips on cat care.